

ABC Responses to Questions on Notice

Senate Inquiry into Emergency Communications

August 2011

Questions taken on notice during the hearing on 8 August 2011

Information on interruptions to telecommunications services

Senator HUMPHRIES: The last point you raised in your submission is about wanting mechanisms by which the ABC would acquire information directly from telecommunications companies when there are interruptions to their services during times of emergency. What is the problem there? Is it that the telecommunications companies will not divulge where their networks have failed? Or is there not a mechanism for them to submit their information directly to ABC about what goes on?

Mr Ward: I am just trying to think of the context for it. Thinking back to the floods, the issue was about restoring the service. I know that was an issue at one stage. I need to go back and have another look at that actually. I am not sure what—

Senator HUMPHRIES: I can recall during the flooding in Queensland that I saw fairly good information from the telecommunications companies about what networks were down. They were saying where their networks were down and when they expected to get them back online. That was probably by way of media releases or something like that. So if you have any specific proposal about how getting that information to ABC could be improved, we would appreciate hearing about what that might be.

Dr Sutton: We will come back to you on that.

Mr Ward: Yes. I will go check that.

During the 2011 Queensland emergencies, the ABC experienced outages in telecommunications lines providing distribution and contribution feeds to its transmitters. The Corporation successfully managed the disruption caused by those network failures, but its ability to do so was reduced by the absence of real-time information about service interruptions. While telecommunications companies did provide infor-

mation on the status of their networks, including to the public, they do not provide it directly to the ABC or in real time.

This situation contrasts directly with the way in which information on network outages is provided to the Corporation by its transmission services provider, Broadcast Australia (BA).

The ABC has a close working and operational relationship with BA. This is particularly important in times of crisis, such as national disasters, as ABC staff have direct online access to BA's alarm and fault management systems. This enables ABC Master Control Rooms to view, in real time, the transmission networks' performance. In addition, the Corporation has an agreed emergency management protocol with BA. This is practiced several times each year in readiness for potential emergencies and to work through appropriate responses to different types of situation that might arise.

As noted in the ABC's submission to the Inquiry, having access to similar mechanisms for real-time fault and service-interruption information from telecommunications companies during natural disasters and other crises would assist the Corporation's service delivery to the community.

Local Radio black spots

Mr Ward: The only solution is for people to look to ways of addressing their reception problems. As I said, it is a small number of people who know they have reception issues. Going to AM radio, the biggest problem is that people have an indoor aerial and cannot receive the signal with an indoor aerial. That is where we say that as part of the preparations and the education campaign, 'You may very well need an external aerial to make sure that you have certainty around the signal'.

Senator BOYCE: Perhaps it might be useful if you could just give us a list of those black spots on notice?

The ABC does not keep records of Local Radio black spots that would allow it to provide the list requested. However, the Corporation would be able to supply detailed computer coverage maps using Google Earth if that would assist the Committee in its inquiry.

ABC Local radio transmissions, which are delivered in both the AM and FM bands and using inland, high-frequency transmissions in the Northern Territory, are estimated to cover 99.38% of Australia's population. The ABC uses sophisticated computer modelling to estimate geographic coverage of the Local Radio transmitters and hence the population covered. Black spots are defined as those locations estimated via computer to receive a signal but which, for a number of reasons, do not have an adequate signal level. These reasons may include obstacles, such as geographical/topographical features (e.g., steep valleys), water tanks and large buildings, as well as power-line interference. In many cases, experienced local reception service providers can employ a variety of techniques and combinations of external antennas and filters to rectify or improve reception.

Written questions on notice

1. Does the ABC consider that as emergency services technology advances and additional capital investment may be required to provide the optimal level of service, that the Corporation should be entitled to specific funding for this area?

As a Commonwealth agency, the Corporation's funding is a matter for government.

The ABC believes its emergency broadcasting to date has served Australian communities well. It has provided those services within its existing funding.

Additional funding for emergency broadcasting would, of course, expand the Corporation's ability to deliver such services. As indicated in its submission, providing emergency services coverage and/or post-disaster recovery support over an extended period—or for several simultaneous or consecutive emergencies—requires considerable resources. Maintaining such services at an appropriate level within existing resources has on occasion proven challenging for the Corporation.

The ABC's submission also indicates a number of ways in which the Corporation could expand or improve its emergency services coverage with additional funding.

2. When were the Memoranda of Understanding between the ABC and the emergency bodies last reviewed?

The Memoranda of Understanding are reviewed in a variety of ways.

Those signed with State Emergency authorities, such as the Queensland Government's Department of Community Safety or the South Australian Government's "Safecom", are reviewed when significant changes to content are identified by either the ABC or the authority.

Those signed directly with individual emergency agencies, such as the Victorian Country Fire Authority or the NSW State Emergency Service, are reviewed annually.

The ABC is at present negotiating an Memorandum of Understanding with the Bureau of Meteorology, which will be reviewed annually.

3. Do you receive any government funding for public awareness and education programs with regard to emergency service procedures and practices? What does your current program of public education involve?

The ABC does not receive any government funding for community education campaigns. In 2006, it received a small grant from Emergency Management Australia for a bushfire season campaign which was highly successful and cost effective.

ABC Local Radio creates its own emergency campaigns based on information provided by emergency agencies. In practice, the level of engagement by emergency services bodies varies considerably. High levels of engagement can lead to excellent and in-depth campaigns, such as those produced with the assistance of the Country Fire Authority of Victoria and the NSW State Emergency Service.

ABC Local Radio program makers schedule annual "awareness days" in which they work closely with emergency agencies to assist the community, and from time to

time the Corporation has entered into partnerships to run awareness “expos.” This is an expensive commitment which comes from its existing funding.

The ABC has created online Emergency Information sites in all regions to deliver essential emergency agency information to local communities.

The Corporation pays from its programming budget for a limited number of road signs in Victoria and South Australia to advise residents where to tune in the event of an emergency. The ABC receives no funding for this. It would like to extend the project, which has been identified by the recent inquiry into floods in Queensland as an essential component of a successful warning service.

ABC Television runs Community Service Announcements (CSAs) provided by emergency agencies in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland during cyclone season. It does not get funded for these.

4. What impact will the continuing take-up of digital radio have on the ability of the population to access emergency service warnings?

It is the ABC’s intention to broadcast its Local Radio services digitally in regional Australia as DAB+ digital radio expands beyond the mainland capital cities. This will provide listeners able to receive DAB+ broadcasts with access to localised emergency information.

However, as the ABC noted in its submission, DAB+ transmissions cover roughly the same geographical area as FM broadcasts. Unlike AM transmissions, which the Corporation currently uses for the majority of its emergency broadcasting, DAB+ is not intended for wide-area coverage. When extended to regional Australia, DAB+ broadcasts will generally not be able to be received beyond the borders of regional towns, including in the wide spaces and roads between population centres, where timely information can be of particular importance to people evacuating in an emergency situation. In addition, it is unlikely to be cost-effective to transmit DAB+ to smaller and remote communities.

As a result, until Australia adopts a supplementary digital radio standard capable of achieving wide-area coverage in regional and remote areas that is comparable to AM, analog AM broadcasts will remain essential to emergency broadcasting in Australia.

The ABC has advocated the further investigation of supplementary digital radio standards (e.g. DRM30 and DRM+) capable of achieving such wide-area coverage. However, to date, such standards have yet to be a proven proposition commercially. The Corporation would welcome formal trials of these technologies by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA).

In addition, it should be noted that few manufacturers are including AM receivers in digital radios. Manufacturers are not required to include an AM capability in digital radios and the ABC understands that the additional components required to do so increase costs. If this continues to be the case, the expansion of digital radio without a wide-area standard is likely to mean that an increasing proportion of Australians will be unable to receive radio emergency broadcasts beyond the borders of regional towns.

For clarity, the Corporation does not believe that the need to resolve the problem of wide-area coverage should delay the rollout of DAB+ services in regional Australia, as DAB+ is an efficient and effective technology for delivering the benefits of digital radio to the roughly 98% of the population currently able to receive FM radio.

5. What do you envisage the future to hold in terms of new methods of transmitting emergency information? Are you devoting any R&D resources to researching this area?

The Australian public is increasingly seeking information across a range of platforms other than traditional radio and television broadcasts, particularly via mobile phones, and online services. They are also increasingly using social media networks that operate across mobile and online platforms. Recent emergencies have demonstrated that this is as true of emergency information as of any other kind of content.

The ABC expects this trend to continue and that, as a result, it will continue to need to find ways to deliver emergency services coverage and information across an increasing array of platforms and formats.

The Corporation is investigating the possible use of “crowd-sourced” information gathering to enhance its emergency services activity. During the Queensland floods in early 2011, it conducted a trial to assess the feasibility and levels of public interest in such technologies using the Ushahidi event-mapping tool to aggregate and display information provided by members of the public. Following an extensive review of that exercise, the ABC plans to conduct a further trial of location-based technologies for emergency services purposes over the 2011–12 Summer.